

Even Language in the Early Stages of Education

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The history of the study of Even language dates back to the middle of the 19th century. Historically, the Evens have also been referred to as Tungusy, Orochi and Lamuts. In 1858 a “Tungus Primer and Prayer Book” was published. This book was based on the Okhotsk dialect of Even and was compiled by a missionary, S. Popov, but widespread use of the text never caught on. In 1859 A. Shirner published a short study of the language of the Okhotsk Evens. In 1895 V. G. Bogoraz studied the language of the Kolymskoomolonski Evens. His work, “Materials in the Lamut Language”, was published in 1931; it represented the first account of the basic grammar of the Even language. The first attempts to create an Even writing system were made in 1931–32. Educational and children’s literature in Even language began to be published at that time in Leningrad. Local publishers in Magadan and Yakutsk have been publishing the works of Even poets and writers in their native language.

At the current turning point of our society’s development, when much attention is being paid to the development of various aspects of the peoples of the North, questions of national languages have taken on special practical and scholarly significance. Even though no one can argue with the social value of bilingualism and the role of Russian as a language for international discourse, efforts have been made to develop each of the native languages, regardless of the number of native speakers.

There are a number of recent works devoted to the study of Even language in schools (Keimetinova 1991, Tsintsius and Kopyrina 1989, Robbek and Gladkova 1987, Krivoshapkin and Keimetinova 1987, Krivoshapkin 1989).

Because language simultaneously embodies spiritual values and is a cultural heritage which defines a people’s distinctiveness, the renaissance and development of minority languages is one of the most basic problems facing the national minorities in our country today. This paper will emphasize the early stages in Even language education.

In teaching a native language, the earliest stage of education is the most important. This is because children arrive at school with differing levels of knowledge of the Even language. In the early years of my work at school, the

children were divided into three groups according to their knowledge: native speakers, those who understand but do not speak the native language, and those with no comprehension. Here it is crucial to adopt an individual approach to the different types of students. This first stage is the most difficult, because the students lack a basic vocabulary and elementary usage skills. At the same time, though, the acquisition of these basic skills and linguistic habits serves as the basis for future mastery of the system of the Even language.

In the first year the students study in three sections: pre-alphabet, alphabet, and post-alphabet. In the first section students are shown pictures of objects or scenes, standard models for sentence construction, and models of the syllabic structure of words. The work in this phase is entirely oral; the children do not yet know grammar but are already accumulating vocabulary and the ability to construct sentences and phrases. Grammar is taught in the next section, along with writing the alphabet, reading and further development of speech. The final section of the first year is designed to further develop speech, and also serves as a textbook for reading and the improvement of proper writing habits. This section is based on the use of narrative texts—stories, tales, poems and dialogues that are appropriate for educational purposes. These texts help teach expressive and conscious reading, and improve pronunciation. They ensure the gradual accumulation, broadening and strengthening of language material.

Why has the need arisen in this case to prepare a new Even textbook for the initial stage of study? This necessity is explained by a whole number of reasons:

(1) The accepted textbooks and methodological guides for the study of Even language do not cover the Bystrinski dialect. I work in the middle school in the village of Anavgai, where adults and children speak this very dialect. Considering this, I should emphasize that the Bystrinski dialect contains significant differences in vocabulary and semantics. For example, in the literary form of Even the word *nakat* translates as “bear”, while in the Bystrinski dialect it means “bear skin”. The word “bear” in the Bystrinski dialect is *kobalan*, “wolf” in literary Even is *nenchak* (нѣнчак) while in Bystrinski it is *neluki* (нѣлуки).

(2) The linguistic situation in the Bystrinski Region, in the Kamchatka Oblast, is different from that in the majority of Even towns in Yakutia or the Magadanski Oblast of Chukotka. In those towns the percentage of people who know the language is much higher. In the villages of Anavgai and Esso

(in Kamchatka) the only native speakers are from the older generation. Because living conditions are also not too remote from the Oblast center, which is easily accessible by bus, it has reached the point where the traditional knowledge of the Evens in these places has almost been lost. Many words are incomprehensible without special instruction and especially visual demonstration. There is, therefore, an urgent need to show students the forgotten or lost objects of their everyday work and customs, which are preserved in the language.

(3) While the existing textbooks of Even contain some illustrations with pictures of different tools and occupations, they do not encompass the entire complex of knowledge, lifestyle and environment of the Evens.

For these reasons we made an attempt to solve the problems mentioned above. Working with the proposed textbook, Even language teachers working in schools of the Bystrinski Region should strive to show simultaneously the richness of the literary form and the peculiarities of the local dialect.

While explaining new words, teachers can offer graphic definitions by showing the object itself. For example, when the teacher is introducing new language materials, she can show animals by using colour pictures or even use stuffed examples of the animals and birds. Here, in explaining a word, is a translation in literary and local dialect.

Preferable are methods which are best suited to the study of living speech and the use of active speaking. In this connection, it is essential in lessons to create real-life situations, and to lead first-hand exercises in nature, in locations where traditional activities are actually carried on.

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